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ABSTRACT

This document describes a family counseling course that incorporates role-plays as a principal component of the class and that uses undergraduate acting majors to role-play families. It notes that using these undergraduates as role-play families solves the problem of recruiting non-counselor education students and also serves as a unique training experience for the acting students. The course is described as it relates to the counseling students and as it relates to the acting students. The document notes that, by integrating the theater and counselor education students in simulated exercises, a number of expected and unexpected benefits were discovered and that several organizational and other difficulties were encountered. These issues are discussed in a section on outcomes, which concludes that the goals of an acting class and a family therapy class can be met in a unique way by involving acting students in role-playing families for counselor education students. Implications for training and recommendations for change are included; the issue of debriefing acting students after the role-play sessions is addressed. (NB)

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Role-Plays in a Family Counseling Course: A Collaborative Effort with the Theater Department

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Abstract

A family counseling course incorporated role-plays as a principle component of the class. Undergraduate acting majors role-played families. The benefits gained and difficulties encountered for both the counseling and acting students are discussed. Implications and recommendations for change using this process are presented.

Role-Plays in a Family Counseling Course:

A Collaborative Effort with the Theater Department

Role-playing is a well-received training activity in a variety of learning environments (Froehle, Robinson, & Kurpius, 1983). In Counselor Education simulated counseling experiences have become a standard training technique (Ford, 1979) where playing the role of the counselor is a routine activity (Anderson, Gunderson, Banken, Halvorson, & Schmutte, 1989). Students typically participate in role-play situations in pre-practicum courses -- particularly courses in Theories and Techniques. These situations usually involve a triadic situation with a client, a counselor, and an observer (Robinson & Cabianca, 1985). In these situations the purpose of the role-plays is in training beginning counselors in the use of basic counseling techniques, not counseling per se, in the sense of uncovering personality conflicts, resolving the presenting problem, or identifying and interpreting the unconscious (Gabriel, 1982).

In general the use of role-playing has been supported in the literature (Bailey, Deardorff, & Nay, 1977; Robinson & Cabianca, 1985; Teevan & Gabel, 1978). The validity of this training technique has been demonstrated not only for teaching new roles but also as a means of helping to integrate theory into practice (Gabriel, 1982).

Other benefits can also be gained by the use of role-plays. Role-playing, particularly if it is videotaped (Galvin, 1981) or observed live, provides an

opportunity for graduate students to receive feedback. Evaluative (Yager & Hector, 1980) and meaningful feedback (Hoglund, 1987) are seen to be important elements of role-plays. Observers, particularly professors and other students in the class (Ostrand & Creaser, 1978), can serve as a valuable source of information for the trainee (Galvin, 1981).

Practice in the form of role-playing and feedback have been suggested to be important in the acquisition of new strategies (Wallace, Horan, Baker, & Hudson, 1975). Often graduate trainees experience some discomfort when adopting new roles in counseling (Yager & Hector, 1980). Practicing new skills in a simulated setting provides students with an opportunity to practice new strategies in a safe environment and prepares them for clinical practice (Galvin, 1981). These practice situations also allow students to practice new skills in situations where their discomfort and unease may not be such a drawback (Yager & Hector, 1980).

In family counseling the use of role-plays can also be helpful in analyzing a variety of potential family situations that the student may encounter by applying the concepts learned in class lectures and readings (Galvin, 1981). Family counseling also presents new challenges for counselor trainees. Students are learning new concepts (i.e., circular vs. linear case conceptualization, may be working with a co-therapist, and are counseling an entire family rather than just one person).

Anderson et al. (1989) found that using undergraduate students can solve

the basic problem of finding clients for novice counselors. They also found advantages in not using other counselor education students for role-play clients. Advantages are that counseling students may not fear retaliation for challenging performances from students from another field, or for constructive feedback to peers, nor feel competitive with the undergraduate students. In addition, using in-class families requires much more time on the part of the students. A family history needs to be developed and students may at times need to participate in more than one role-play family. Furthermore, graduate students who role-play families often critique from their roles as clients rather than as peers in the classroom.

B.F.A. Acting Majors in the School of Theater are used to serve as the role-play families. This solves the problem of recruiting non-counselor education students and also serves as a unique training experience for the actors.

A Family Counseling Course Using Role-Playing

Counselor Education Students

A family counseling course was designed which uses simulated family role-plays as a major component of the course. At the beginning of the course students are informed that extended role-playing is an extensive part of the course. Students are also informed that they will be working with a co-therapist whom they are to select from among their classmates. (In the event of uneven classroom numbers, several alternatives have been used, including: Assigning a graduate student, a student in the course who enrolls in a one hour independent

study course, or a volunteer from the class who seeks additional experience and feedback.) Students are then presented with the major family counseling theories to be covered during the course and asked to select one of these theories with which to work.

After the co-therapist pairs have selected their theory they are given a one to two page case study which briefly describes their role-play family. The information they are given is very similar to what a counselor might receive over the phone or from a brief intake form (e. g., description and development of the presenting problem, names and ages of family members, referral source, etc.).

For ten weeks students meet for two hours a week for class, lecture, and discussion. Each pair meets with their families for four sessions outside of class beginning the third week of the term. After the second and fourth sessions they meet with a doctoral student to review their videotapes and process their sessions.

Toward the end of the term, each pair presents their role-play case to the class with accompanying segments of their videotapes and they receive oral feedback from their classmates. Written feedback is provided by one other pair using a Therapy Interview Analysis (TIA). The TIA requires detailed feedback on the theory presented and asks the feedback pair how they might have treated the case from the perspective used.

A Case Study Treatment Plan is completed by each counseling student

which requests detailed analysis of their role-play family. This insures that significant concepts from the lectures and readings are incorporated by the students. Another requirement is a written paper. Students are offered a choice between writing a family autobiography using the concepts learned in class and writing a paper that integrates the family therapies covered in the course.

Theater Students

The acting students are enrolled in an intensive four year curriculum. Acting students work extensively on skills necessary for the effective use of role-plays in family counseling training. The role-play, referred to as a scenarios by theater participants, provides extended training in improvisation, detailed work on character biography, talking and listening skills, planning moment-to-moment, and a vehicle for clarifying the importance of staying in the moment.

Acting students in the second year of training are used for the role-play families. The students have had one year of acting classes, including intensive work in improvisation. During the first week of class, the counselor educator shows the film, Constructing a Genogram, to give acting students a basic idea of the biography they may need to incorporate into their roles. The acting coach is given a copy of the family case studies which are given to the counselor education students. He attempts to match the roles to the actors most capable of understanding the circumstances (including the ego states) of the character to be counseled. Every attempt is made to present the counselor with a believable family unit.

After the roles have been assigned both groups of students exchange phone numbers and are instructed to set up an appointment by the third week of classes. Whenever possible the counseling sessions take place during the regularly scheduled class time of the acting class. Role-plays are conducted in the Counseling Center of the Counselor Education Program where video-taping facilities and equipment are available.

The skills that can be developed by the acting students involved in role-plays are those that are standard for improvisations. Role-playing requires that the students immerse themselves into the script (the role-play) to acquire basic acting skills. Because the improvisation exercise explores the extra-textual elements of acting, the counselor education students as both audience and participants add unexpected information to a live performance. The acting students need to recreate the conversation that is alluded to in the role-play and improvise their observations within the context of their roles requiring intensive listening.

Through-line work, where the actor needs to question within the role who am I and where am I going, can also be obtained through the role-playing technique. Students also need to play from the self. It is not unusual, or necessarily abnormal, for a reason to enter the theater, acting in particular, to escape from the self. That desire, however, must be a short-lived objective in a profession that requires one to play from the self. The actor in training is taught to accept the idea that the problem in acting is not in playing from the self but in

not having enough of oneself to play from. In improvisation they have no choice but to encounter the self. They also need to draw from real experience maintaining a degree of control so that their own experiences and the role do not become blurred.

Recognizing and accepting various ego states is another important goal of this exercise. Success in acting depends on the actor's ability to stay in touch with the child in them, in order to enter into a state of play. However, actors are called upon to play from their adult and parent ego states as well. The role-play family experience gives them the opportunity to observe and experience the various ego states.

Outcomes -- Benefits and Difficulties

By integrating the theater and counselor education students in simulated exercises, a number of expected and unexpected benefits were discovered. Several organizational and other difficulties were encountered.

The expected benefits for the counselor education students included the opportunity to practice new counseling strategies in a safe environment. Reading about family counseling and actually practicing the interpersonal and case conceptualization skills necessary for effective family counseling are very different experiences.

The class presentations and discussions allowed other students the opportunity to vicariously experience the practice of theories other than those for which they had primary responsibilities. Furthermore, the feedback from

doctoral student supervisors, peers, and the professor provided each co-therapy pair with different levels of feedback.

The unexpected benefits for the counselor education students were related to working with students outside the department. Because acting students were used, often these students, as a consequence of their desire to play from what they believed, would slightly alter their role or add to the circumstance in the role-play. Altered roles initially disconcerted the counseling students who had been accustomed to fellow students either strictly adhering to a role or helping them out. However, these alterations more often than not mimicked real counseling situations. Often clients present something different in actual sessions than what they initially report. This is particularly characteristic of family counseling.

Occasionally a member of the role-play family did not attend the family counseling session due to a variety of reasons (e. g., an audition or illness). This, too, created a more naturalistic set of circumstances for the counselor. The counseling students were forced to make a variety of decisions about how to proceed.

The expected benefit for the acting students was the opportunity to facilitate the integration of concepts learned in the classroom. They also had the opportunity to process their roles and reactions with their classmates and acting coach, receiving invaluable feedback.

Some unexpected benefits for the acting students allowed them to experience roles not encountered in other types of improvisations. For several of

the students, this experience helped them in roles for which they were later cast in theater productions (e. g., playing a parent role). It appeared to help them gain a larger perspective not only for the parental role but also a sensitivity to some of the family dynamics involved.

Some of the difficulties we encountered were organizational in nature. Because the role-plays were scheduled during the theater students class time, counseling students who could not meet during any of the established times had to be provided with a more traditional alternative. Other difficulties were encountered by the acting coach. After completing their role-plays, the acting students returned to class. Due to the lack of a role-defusing component, the acting class was often disrupted by the need of those students just completing their role-plays to vent or to process their experience. On occasion this would occur with students who came from dysfunctional families and were playing roles too close to their personal experiences. Another problem was a lack of acting students who were suitable, from an acting perspective, to play the role of older parents. At times case studies were altered to include single parent families or to a parent who refused to come in for treatment.

The goals of an acting class and a family therapy class can be met in a unique way by involving acting students in role-play families for counselor education students.

Implications for Training and Recommendations for Change

This course in family counseling, which uses role-playing as a major

component, continues to be altered and developed. The feedback gathered during the past few years is constantly being incorporated into the next offering of the course. Using undergraduate acting students to serve as role-play families in a graduate course in counselor education has been found to be a viable form of training. Benefits are gained both by the counseling students and the acting students.

Some of the recommendations for change are easily implemented. Others require some brain-storming and experimentation. The need for a debriefing process for the acting students is critical. Galvin (1981) recommends an extensive debriefing process after role-play sessions. Recommendations include requiring acting students to keep a journal of their feelings after each role-play session. Providing doctoral students in the Department's Counseling Center for debriefing feelings generated by the role-plays is another alternative. It may be feasible for acting students to examine their assigned roles and either to be cast into another role or to alter the role to keep it from hitting too close to home.

The problem of a lack of significant numbers of theater students to play older parental figures could be addressed by incorporating counselor education students into the role-plays. Another possible solution would be to break the family group into more sibling subunits. A simpler solution might be the use of family case studies using younger parents, single parents, and parents that are absent due to refusing treatment. Careful consideration must be given to choosing family case studies similar to situations counseling students are likely to later

encounter in clinical practice (Gabriel, 1982). Gabriel also suggests that, whenever possible, the role-play participants be involved in developing the roles they are expected to play. The acting students involved in this have also made this recommendation.

Integrating students from two courses and different perspectives is an interesting challenge. However, as Yager and Hector (1980) have noted, in many ways the two fields, counseling and acting, are very similar. The primary difference involves the goals. It is that difference which makes the project interesting and challenging for participants and evaluators.

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